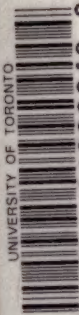


ROMNEY

BY
RANDALL
· DAVIES ·



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ROMNEY

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

REYNOLDS

Containing sixteen examples
of the master's work

VELASQUEZ

Containing sixteen illustrations
in colour

A. AND C. BLACK, SOHO SQUARE, LONDON, W.



ROMNEY

LADY HAMILTON WITH A GOAT

Tankerville Chamberlayne, Esq.

ROMNEY

BY

RANDALL DAVIES

CONTAINING SIXTEEN EXAMPLES IN COLOUR
OF THE MASTER'S WORK

LONDON

ADAM AND CHARLES BLACK

1914



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PREFACE

THE most obvious gap in the ranks of the portraits by British painters in our National Collections is caused by the absence of any work of really first-rate importance by George Romney.

The Parson's Daughter, in the National Gallery, and the *Mrs. Robinson*, at Hertford House, are of the finest quality ; but they are only heads.

The large portrait of *Mrs. Mark Currie* is charming, but by no means so fine.

In the *Louisa, Countess of Mansfield*, we are nearer to the very best ; but that is only a temporary loan, and until the public are in possession of one or two of his superb whole-length portraits, such as Earl Crewe's *Lady Milnes*, the Marquis of Lansdowne's *Lord Henry Petty*, or the *Lady Bell Hamilton*, they will hardly be able to judge the work of Romney as fairly as that of his more fortunate contemporaries.

In placing him in the first rank of English painters, however, the present generation are only doing him as much honour as he deserves, after a century of neglect; and there seems to be no fear of his fame diminishing again or his popularity abating.

R. D.

GEORGE ROMNEY

THAT Reynolds and Gainsborough were the two greatest portrait painters in England during the latter half of the eighteenth century is a proposition which no one is likely to question. Both had qualities which raised them far above the general, and considerably higher than even the foremost of their competitors ; and though preference for the work of the one or the other of them is often as much a matter of taste as of opinion, the pre-eminence of the two is beyond dispute.

When we come to fill the third place, however, the question is not so readily settled. There are many candidates who are, or ought to be, in the running ; and although the fashion of the present time may send up the prices of now one now another beyond all that is reasonable and sensible, it would be rash to say that the most popular has the best

right to the position. Only last year, for example, a new planet swam into the dealers' ken, a portrait of *Benjamin Franklin*, painted in 1762 by Mason Chamberlin, one of the original members of the Royal Academy, realising the extraordinary figure of two thousand eight hundred guineas; a figure which, as the *Times* felicitously observes, "places the artist on an auction level with Reynolds and Gainsborough."

Judged by the fickle standard of the auction room, Raeburn, at the present moment, would have precedence over Hoppner, and Hoppner, unless I am mistaken, over Romney. But who can say whether before another season is over, the merits of Lawrence or Beechey, West or Copley, may not come up in the market, and impress an uncritical public with ideas of beauty and genius which have hitherto escaped their notice?

In my own opinion, George Romney has better claim than any of the others to be considered next to Reynolds and Gainsborough as a portrait painter, inasmuch as he seems to me to have exhibited more

His Place among Others

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consistently the variety of qualities necessary for excellence in that particular branch of his art.

In its outward manipulation of charm and beauty, the work of Romney is all that an amateur need ask of it, and considerations of mere elegance have probably advanced his popularity in the sale room as much as others more really important. But charm and beauty of this sort are delusive guides and, unless backed by some more enduring test of excellence, will lead us downwards only, through the scale of Hoppner, Lawrence, Harlow, and Shee, till we find ourselves in the company of the simpering beauties of the early and mid-Victorian age, with their sloping shoulders and curling ringlets. With Romney we are perfectly safe. No twinge of conscience warns us to withstand the allurements of *Lady Hamilton*, or the fascination of the *Parson's Daughter*. We may flirt as long and as desperately as we please—in an artistic sense—with *Mrs. Mark Currie*, without the slightest stain on our æsthetic morals. There is nothing technically meretricious about any of these beauties, and the virtue of our taste is

only strengthened by the pleasurable enjoyment of their society.

And why?

One of the first reasons that occur to me is one that may possibly be challenged as being merely paradoxical ; namely, that Romney, like Reynolds and Gainsborough, was not primarily a portrait painter. That all three of them became painters of portraits, and will go down to posterity as such, was not because they wished to, but by the accident of circumstance. Reynolds was an humble and assiduous disciple of Michel Angelo, an earnest seeker after conquests in " the grand style." Of Gainsborough, it was said that music was his pleasure and painting his profession ; while in that profession, as we know, it was landscape which chiefly occupied his mind and most delighted him. And Romney actually writes to his friend Hayley, " This cursed portrait-painting. How I am shackled with it ! "

To explain the paradox we must look back a little into the history of painting in England, with a glance

THOMAS JOHN CLAVERING, AFTERWARDS EIGHTH
BARONET, AND HIS SISTER, CATHERINE MARY

Col. C. W. Napier Clavering



at that of portrait-painting in other countries besides. Taking the latter view first, we find that the only name, which readily occurs to us, of an artist who painted nothing but portraits, is that of Holbein. In all the greatest schools of painting, since the days of Cimabue, portraiture was, as it were, a "bye-product," and with a few exceptions like Holbein, Velasquez, or Vandyck, there is no great painter who is as well known for his portraits as for his other works. In England, until the arrival of Reynolds, there was no school of painting at all, and the only reason for any painter coming to England was the business, rather than the art, of making likenesses of its vigorous inhabitants. In England, consequently, when a school of painting was at last established, it is hardly surprising to find that the painting of portraits was the most considerable branch of it, not only in the early days of its commencement, but throughout almost the whole of its development; and it was not until comparatively late in its history that landscape assumed considerable proportions and finally outgrew the other branch.

Had Reynolds and Romney, like Gainsborough, been landscape painters at heart, it is probable that such a combination of great talent would have resulted in a much earlier triumph for the landscapist, and that we should not have had to wait for Turner and Constable to restore the balance. For Richard Wilson, the actual founder of the English School of landscape, only failed to establish it from want of recognition, and there were many others who were fit to achieve great works in landscape if it had not been that they were compelled to comply with the popular demand for portraiture without regard to their artistic inclinations.

But there was a third branch of the art on which, though unheeded alike by the patron and the public, the minds of Romney and of many more of the most accomplished artists of the time were bent, namely, the historical; and so long as the market was closed to their achievements in this direction, it was impossible for even the greatest among them to exist without making portraiture their regular business.

Reynolds was wise, or fortunate, enough to satisfy his historical or classical aspirations by working them in, so to speak, with his portraits; and while his purely allegorical or poetical compositions have added little to his reputation, he is never so great, or so attractive, as when painting portraits in terms of romance. Nor is he less deservedly popular when realising some idyllic fancy like *The Age of Innocence*, or *The Strawberry Girl*, *The Infant Samuel* or *Robinetta*—all of which are, in fact, portraits of a single model. Benjamin West, on the other hand, though fortunate in obtaining Royal approval, and truly royal payment, for his historical compositions, found little encouragement from the public in taking to this branch of the profession. "As any attempt in history was at that period an almost unexampled effort," wrote James Northcote, R.A., on the exhibition of West's *Pylades and Orestes* at the Exhibition of 1766, "this picture became a matter of much surprise. West's house was soon filled with visitors from all quarters to see it; and those amongst the highest rank who

were not able to come to his house to satisfy their curiosity, desired to have his permission to have it sent to them ; nor did they fail, every time it was returned to him, to accompany it with compliments of the highest commendation on its great merits. But the most wonderful part of the story is that notwithstanding all this bustle and commendation bestowed upon this justly admired picture, by which Mr. West's servant gained upwards of thirty pounds by showing it, yet no one mortal ever asked the price of the work, or so much as offered to give him a commission to paint any other subject. Indeed there was one gentleman who spoke of it with such praise to his father, that he immediately asked him the reason he did not purchase, as he so much admired it, when he answered, 'What could I do if I had it? You surely would not have me hang up a modern English picture in my house unless it was a portrait?'"

It was in this year that John Singleton Copley exhibited his first picture, a boy with a squirrel, in England. He, too, was obsessed with the



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historical idea, and carried it so far that he is better known for his grand compositions, like the *Death of Chatham*, than for the many very excellent portraits he painted. Angelica Kauffmann is remembered only by her well-intentioned but rather boneless classical compositions; and Fuseli, so far as he is remembered at all, by his weird nightmare effects in historical pieces.

Broadly speaking, history was a thankless mistress to the painters, and had it not been that Romney chose to paint portraits for the sake of accumulating enough money for the pursuit of his own artistic ambitions, his reputation as an artist would now be as totally forgotten as are those of many whose names it is almost unfair to them to mention in the present unappreciative days.

But there is fortunately another aspect of the question. A great deal is being said at the present time about the merits and demerits of a classical education for boys. On the one hand we hear that it is perfectly useless for the ordinary youth to spend the greater part of his time at school in the generally

hopeless effort of acquiring some familiarity with the classical languages. On the other we are told that a boy must learn something, and that the training to the mind afforded by the study of Latin and Greek is more valuable in after life than the acquisition of any practically useful knowledge. Whichever side we may incline to in the case of the ordinary everyday boy who is to be sent out into the world to make his living in one of a dozen or more different walks of life, there can be no question that the whole-hearted pursuit of a beloved study, whether of Greek or Latin or Chinese, by a man of purpose and character, never fails to improve him in any other study which he may wish to undertake. For the higher walks of life, such as statesmanship, or the control of large interests, or the influence of considerable bodies of opinion, it is generally admitted that the school and university training is advantageous. An archbishop is not in these days required to address Convocation in Latin, nor is a Prime Minister expected to quote Horace in debate. But either can delegate the useful duties of life to others, while they themselves are better fitted

by breadth of view to deal in the largest possible manner with public questions. It is for this reason, to return to our paradox, that I consider Romney's excellence in portraiture was due, in a large measure, to the fact that he was not willingly a portrait painter. When we see that Reynolds came back from Italy filled with the ardour inspired by Michel Angelo and Raphael for great painting; when we see Gainsborough, torn from his beloved woods and fields to the painting room, both of them establishing their reputation with practically nothing but portraiture, I hope that the paradox will seem less paradoxical, and that it will be agreed that Romney, too, struggling to the last with the relentless Muse of his historical fancy, was in reality indebted to her for most of his excellence in the department of portraiture where we are ready to accord him so high a place. It is only another version of the old fable of the treasure which the father induced his boys to dig for in the vineyard. How many a fashionable painter would do well for himself and for his art by exchanging his brush for a spade!

Anybody can paint a portrait. It is really easier than taking a photograph. One has only to look at contemporary representations of the younger members of one's friends' families in oil or pastel to realise that the ordinary person prefers a bad picture to a good photograph. There is something gratifying to the latent vanity of the sitter in the mere fact of sitting to a painter. In the old days, when there were no such things as photographs, the inducement to sit must have been still greater, and the demand for portraits enormous. Horace Walpole declares that there were no less than two thousand portrait painters in London in the middle of the eighteenth century : modern investigation has accounted for over seven hundred ! To be a portrait painter, clearly, then was not to be an artist ; and when we come to sift the artists from the mere likeness-mongers, we shall almost invariably find that the only great portraits were the work of men who excelled in other directions, as we have found in the cases of Reynolds and Gainsborough.

Applying this test to Romney, it is quite surprising to discover how little is said of his portraiture

MARIA MARGARET CLAVERING, AFTERWARDS LADY NAPIER

Col. C. W. Napier Clavering





by his two earliest biographers, William Hayley, his life-long friend and admirer, and the Reverend John Romney, his son. Nor is there very much more, and certainly no indication of his present pre-eminence among the British portrait painters, in Allan Cunningham's lengthy Memoir of him published in 1832. It is true that his popularity, amounting to serious rivalry of Reynolds at one period, is mentioned incidentally; as is also the devotion of his art to Lady Hamilton. But these are only considered as diversions, as it were, of his main purpose into a side channel. The dream of his life, we are to understand, was the achievement of historical compositions.

Certainly he has been unfortunate in his biographers. A more tedious and pretentious compilation than the quarto of over four hundred pages published by William Hayley in 1809 as "The Life of George Romney, Esq.," I hope it may never be anybody's fate to peruse. Hayley was a second-rate poet—his most considerable work being "The Triumphs of Temper"—with a third-rate intellect.

"The influence which the friendship of Hayley exercised over the life of Romney," the son of the artist writes, "was in many respects injurious. His friendship was grounded on selfishness, and the means by which he obtained it was flattery. He was able also by a canting kind of hypocrisy to confound the distinctions between vice and virtue, and to give a colouring to conduct that might and probably did mislead Romney on some occasions. He drew him too much from general society, and almost monopolised him to himself, and thus narrowed the circle of his acquaintance and friends. By having intimated an intention of writing Romney's Life he made him extremely afraid of doing anything that might give offence. He was always interfering in his affairs—volunteering his advice; and I have much reason to believe that whatever errors the latter may have committed, they were simply owing to the counsel or instigation of Hayley."

From Hayley, then, we need not expect very much that is likely to be of value in the way of criticism. But for one thing he is to be thanked,

namely the inclusion in his volume of a short sketch of Romney's professional career by John Flaxman, R.A. From this I shall have occasion to borrow more than a few illuminating passages, a couple of which I now adduce as evidence of how little Romney's portraiture was considered in an estimate of his art specially written at the time of his death by one whom Hayley calls "an approved artist":

"As Romney was gifted with peculiar powers for historical and ideal painting, so his heart and soul were engaged in the pursuit of it, whenever he could extricate himself from the importunate business of portrait painting. It was his delight by day and study by night, and for this his food and rest were often neglected." And again, by way of summing up, "A peculiar shyness of disposition kept him from all association with public bodies, and led to the pursuit of his studies in retirement and solitude which . . . allowed him more leisure for observation, reflection, and trying his skill in other arts connected with his own. And indeed few artists, since the fifteenth

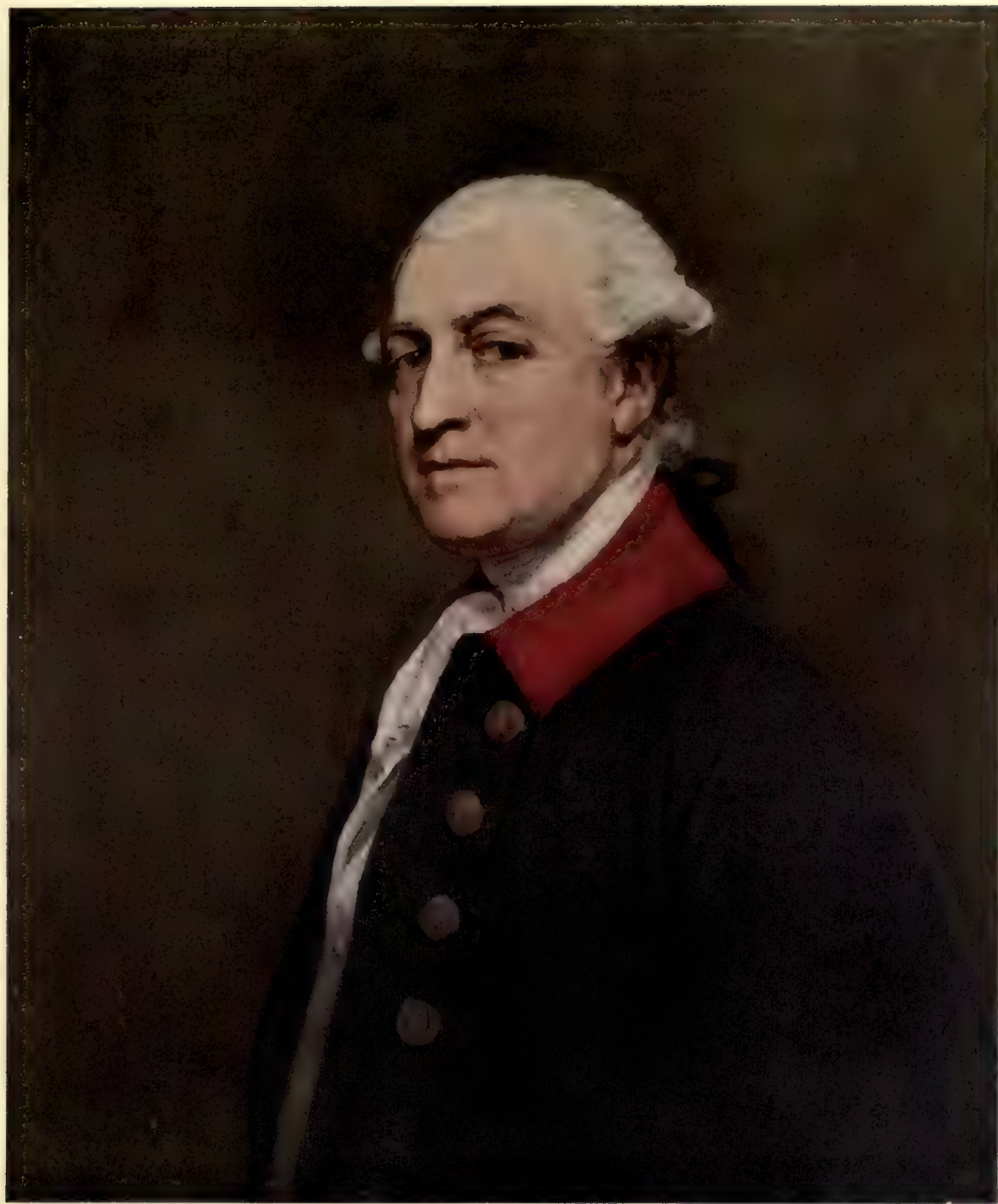
century, have been able to do so much in so many different branches; for besides his beautiful compositions and pictures, which have added to the knowledge and celebrity of the English school, he modelled like a sculptor, carved ornaments in wood with great delicacy, and could make an architectural design in a fine taste, as well as construct every part of the building."

The word "portraits" it will be observed occurs but once in these passages; nor does it appear elsewhere in the sketch. If then it be admitted that neither Reynolds nor Gainsborough nor Romney were primarily portrait painters, and that their pre-eminence arises in a high degree from this cause, we shall have arrived at a standpoint from which to observe how each of the three was influenced by that cause in a different manner, and so obtain a better idea of their several excellences than we are likely to obtain from their "auction values."

In the first place, it is to be remembered that neither Reynolds nor Gainsborough was actually averse to painting portraits, whereas we have

COLONEL THOMAS THORNTON

Col. C. W. Napier Clavering



Reynolds and Gainsborough 17

Romney's written word that he hated it. Sir Joshua, to be sure, speaks of his charming little *Strawberry Girl* as "One of the half-dozen original things that no man ever exceeds in his lifetime." But he was quite content to receive as many as a hundred-and-fifty sitters in the course of a single year. Gainsborough, too, could go off into raptures at the beauties of the young princes and princesses when he was painting them at Windsor, and write a flaming letter to the Royal Academy when the royal portraits were not hung as he desired. Both found their highest expression in portraiture, as did Romney; but whereas they were not slow to realise that their respective gifts, widely different as they were, fitted them pre-eminently for this sort of work, it would seem that Romney never realised it at all; and while the other two brought all their forces, consciously, to the beautification of this particular branch of their art, Romney appears to have done no more than acquiesce coldly but, be it observed, conscientiously, in the necessity for it.

I would therefore submit that the chief char-

acteristics which distinguish Romney's portraits from those of his two greater contemporaries are coldness—or rather simplicity—and conscientiousness. These are conscious qualities, to which I would add a third, which I believe to be unconscious, that is to say, the influence of the classical art of the Greeks, which for the sake of brevity I will call classicism.

The distinction it seems to me is this. That whereas Reynolds was aiming at the grand style, and spared no occasion for employing it in practice and expatiating on it in precept, it is impossible to say that he did not consciously apply its principles—I say consciously—to every portrait he ever undertook. In Gainsborough's portraits again we recognise the hand and the heart of the landscape painter consciously employing the terms of his favourite craft, when we find in them the same charm, the same natural and easy grace which is the great characteristic of his landscape drawings and sketches. While Reynolds was painting men and women in terms of art, Gainsborough was painting them in terms of nature. Both were applying all the principles which they had

imbibed from their earliest youth to the particular object on which they were engaged.

With Romney, on the other hand, this was clearly not the case. He detested having to paint portraits. His mind was wholly attracted to allegorical and poetical subjects. Allan Cunningham, writing in 1832, almost apologises for mentioning his portraits at all. "A list of all the works which Romney executed in those busy days," he writes, "would occupy several pages; it would, however, be absurd to specify many of them, since they can possess little interest except for particular families." He then gives a list of eighteen portraits which are "remarkable for containing more than one figure, or for their superior merit, or on account of the character and station of the individual represented," adding that "in one of these lucky and prosperous years he earned by portraiture alone some three thousand six hundred pounds."

Now if Romney had called upon his Muse to assist him in his portraiture, as did Reynolds and Gainsborough, there can be little doubt that his

popularity would have extended enormously, and that his reputation would have been increased in hardly a less degree. But whether it was the influence of Hayley, or whether, as is more probable, it was the effect of his character and his deep feeling for his art, Romney rarely, if ever, permitted his Muse to descend into his painting-room when he was executing a commission for a portrait. An honest presentment of his sitters was apparently his only concern; he took their money, and he conscientiously painted their portraits, in their habits as they lived, without any conscious attempt at achieving more.

But in keeping his Muse thus apart, it must not be supposed that he succeeded in banishing her from his inmost self. Her influence is to be seen and felt in almost every portrait he painted. Rarely as she was allowed on the stage—as in the famous group of *Lady Gower and her Children*—she was ever present, though behind the scenes; how else can one account for the almost classical severity of tone that keeps every portrait of Romney's, however simple, from being merely trivial, pretty, or banal?

His Sensitive Temperament 21

An alternative explanation of the reticence and simplicity of Romney's portraits, his seeming unwillingness to expand into allegorical portraiture, is his supposed sensitiveness of temperament. Hayley expatiates on this quality to such an extent as to shake our belief in its existence ; but that it did exist in some degree is unfortunately too evident to deny. How much or how little it had to do with the limitation of his fancy in portraiture must only be a matter of opinion, but since as good evidence of it as any is to be found in the story of three of his earliest pictures, we may as well consider it before proceeding further.

Almost the first of Romney's "popular successes" was a family piece containing portraits of Sir George Warren, his lady, and their little daughter, which was exhibited in 1769. "This picture was highly extolled by the public," says John Romney, "and brought him still more into notice. According to a design in one of his sketch-books, Lady Warren is represented as seated in a graceful and easy posture, with a fronting attitude, but with her face slightly

turned to her right, having her left elbow leaning upon a pedestal, and the hand extended over her daughter's shoulder, a girl about six or seven years old, who is standing by her. The young lady has her hands gently crossed over her bosom, and is caressing a little bird which she holds in one hand. Sir George, habited in a picturesque style, is standing rather to the left, and somewhat more backward in the picture than his lady. He has his right arm moderately extended and is directing her attention to a distant object. The composition is beautiful, correct, and natural, and the simplicity, grace, and feeling expressed in the figure and character of Miss Warren are admirable."

This description, it is to be observed, is not from the picture itself, which the writer had never seen, but from the artist's drawing for it ; and it is evident that the drawing must have been executed with much greater care and particularity than is to be found in most of Romney's sketches. The picture itself is now in the possession of Lord Vernon, at Sudbury Hall, Derbyshire, the little daughter having married the

MRS. ROBINSON AS "PERDITA"

Wallace Collection



first Lord Vernon. Its present owner informed Mr. Humphry Ward that it was always supposed to be by Reynolds, and that a professional valuer valued it as such for probate in 1883.

That so successful an attempt should be repeated was only natural. Hogarth and Highmore had painted some of these "conversation pieces," as they were called, but with indifferent, or at any rate no great amount of popular, success, and one might have supposed that a young artist would have been ready enough to respond to the encouragement accorded to him in this particular class of picture. But no others of the sort are known to have been attempted, with one exception. At about the same time Romney was engaged in a portrait group of Mr. Leigh and his family. Unfortunately, his well-wishing friend Cumberland, the dramatist, in his efforts to push Romney to the front, was ill-advised enough to drag Garrick to see his pictures. Now Garrick hated Cumberland, and had a very poor opinion of him—which is all there is to excuse him for an unpardonable exhibition of bad taste. "I brought him to see Rom-

ney's pictures," writes Cumberland, "hoping to interest him in his favour. A large family piece unluckily arrested his attention ; a gentleman in a close-buckled bob-wig, and a scarlet waistcoat laced with gold, with his wife and children (some sitting, some standing), had taken possession of some yards of canvas, very much, as it appeared, to their own satisfaction—for they were perfectly amused in a contented abstinence from all thought or action. Upon this unfortunate group, when Garrick had fixed his lynx's eyes, he began to put himself into the attitude of the gentleman, and turning to Mr. Romney, 'Upon my word, Sir,' he said, 'this is a very regular well-ordered family; and that is a very bright-rubbed mahogany table at which that motherly good lady is sitting; and this worthy gentleman in the scarlet-waistcoat is doubtless a very excellent subject (to the State, I mean, if these are all his children), but not for your art, Mr. Romney, if you mean to pursue it with that success which I hope will attend you.' The modest artist took the hint, as it was meant, in good part, and turned his family with their faces to the wall."

If Romney had been only moderately sensitive we can easily understand that an impertinence of this sort (for Cumberland was as dense as he was well-meaning in thinking it was intended in good part) would have been intolerable from anybody; but when we remember that Garrick was an intimate friend of Reynolds, we may readily admit that it had in fact a certain influence on Romney's choice of subject and treatment. We have seen that in the other group his success was the result of careful and prepared study; but I know of no other sketches of his for family groups—except those for the Gower picture—though there are plenty of studies of single figures.

A couple of years later, again, he painted the actress Mrs. Yates in the character of the Tragic Muse, at whole length. This was twelve years or more before Sir Joshua painted his famous picture of Mrs. Siddons, so that it is hardly possible to compare the two. But Romney's picture cannot have proved more than a *succès d'estime*. "I have often wished," says Hayley, "that it had been the lot of Romney to paint this great actress, one of the

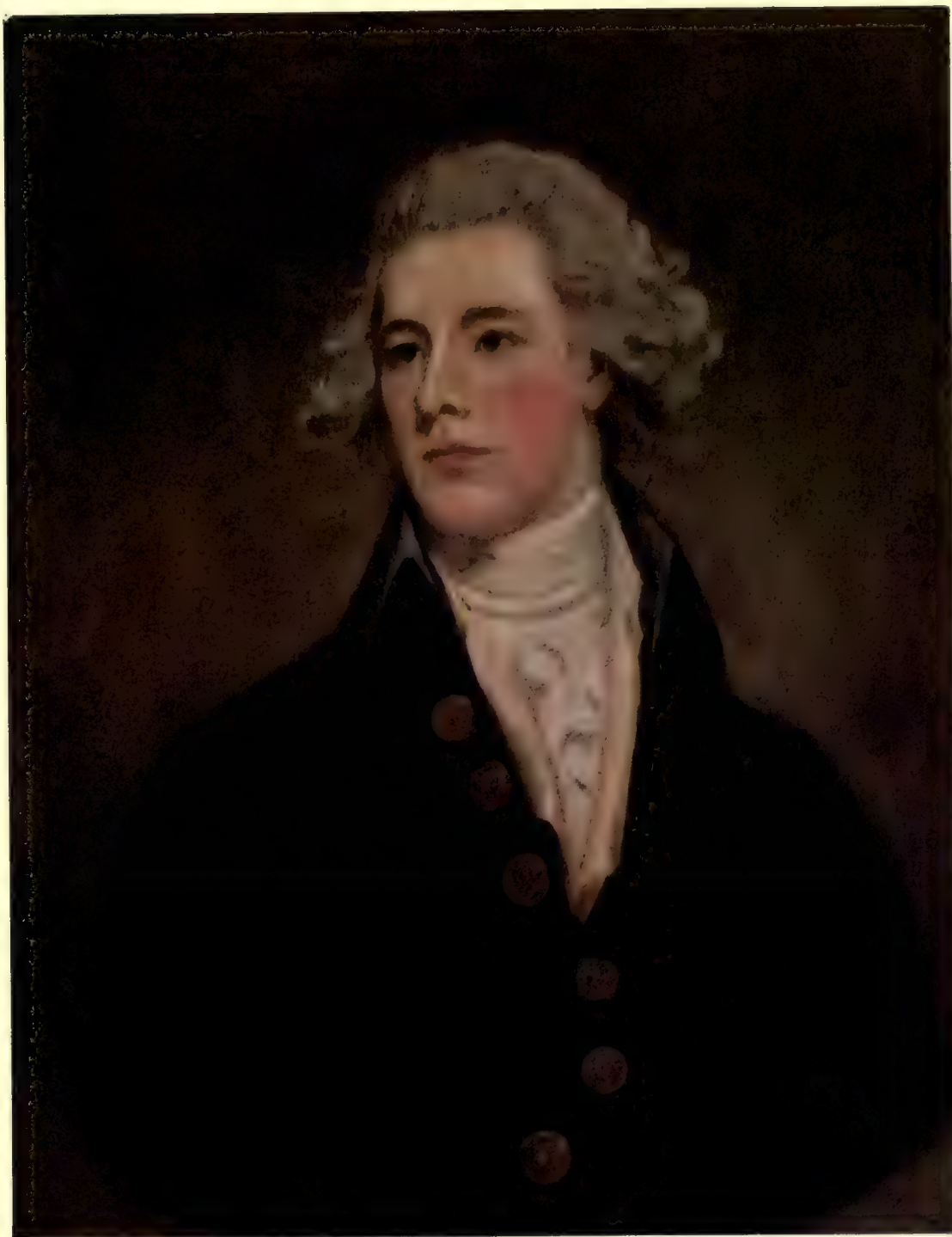
most gracefully majestic of our tragic queens, at a maturer season of her life, and in the full meridian of his power; for in that case I am persuaded the Tragic Muse of Romney would not have appeared what at present I must allow her to be, very far inferior, as a work of the pencil, to the Tragic Muse of Sir Joshua." For once we may take Hayley's opinion as more or less correct, for although I am unable to pronounce on the merits of the picture, not having seen it, its history records what was the popular estimate of it. It was purchased by Alderman Boydell, and put up to auction at Christie's after his death in 1810, when it was bought in for nine and a half guineas. In 1812 it was put up again and there was no bid, and the same in 1817 and 1822. In 1824 it at last found a purchaser at £10.

As this was, according to John Romney, his first whole length portrait of a lady, it would seem probable that he did not receive sufficient encouragement to pursue the allegorical treatment of portrait subjects.

But whether we incline to the one view or the other, or perhaps accept a commixture of the two in

WILLIAM PITT, THE YOUNGER

National Gallery



Characteristics of his Portraits 27

such proportions as may seem to each of us most suitable to the facts, we find it to be true that from henceforth Romney's sitters were treated as ordinary everyday human beings, and not as gods, goddesses, heroes, nymphs, muses, or what not. What he gave them was of his best, so far as it went, and, as I have suggested, his best went farther than he was conscious of in giving it. Let us now see how his portraiture responds to the three tests I ventured to suggest, namely, simplicity, conscientiousness, and classicism.

First, then, as to simplicity, by which I mean in this connection simplicity of presentment—the plain prosaic record on canvas of the likeness of the sitter. When we come to consider the third point, classicism, we shall see that this simplicity extends to every particular; but for the moment I am only considering the first question that arises when a commission for a portrait is given—"How would you like to be painted?" In Romney's studio there seems to have been but one answer, namely, "Exactly as I am." Of accessories there were

practically none. The portrait was painted and that was all. A portrait by Romney is first and foremost a portrait.

Secondly, his conscientiousness. Who would believe, on a view of any of Romney's portraits, that he looked upon portraiture as a cursed occupation by which he was shackled? Is there any trace of unwillingness, of haste, of slovenliness? Is there any hint that he was out of temper with his sitters, or careless in the way he posed them, or indifferent to the perfection of his painting? We may miss the animation of Gainsborough, or the triumphant glitter of Reynolds in many of his sober contemplative faces, but of the perfunctory conventionalisms of his contemporaries or the slipshod hurry and make-believe of the modern exhibitors we find no suggestion. Whatever he did was done with all his strength, if not with all his heart, and no one could complain that his portrait suffered from want of painstaking devotion to the subject. His care and conscientiousness are as easily seen, too, in his most busy and prosperous days as they are in his earliest

PORTRAITS OF MR. AND MRS. WILLIAM LINDOW

(1770) National Gallery



portraits, like that of Mr. and Mrs. Lindow, which was painted in 1760 before he left Lancaster.

John Romney records an amusing instance of his father's efforts in this respect. "I remember his telling me once," he writes, "what difficulty he had with a sitter in order to accomplish a little expression. The gentleman was from the country, and an attorney; and though his profession required intelligence, yet his countenance gave no indication of it. To remove a settled dulness that pervaded his features, Mr. Romney made many attempts, starting every popular topic of conversation, but all in vain; at length by some uncommon chance, he happened to mention hunting; at the sound of which word a ray of animation immediately sparkled in the eyes of the sitter, and imparted a certain degree of vivacity to his countenance. Mr. Romney took his measure accordingly, and led him into the subject; after which he was relieved from any further attempts at conversation as the worthy gentleman expatiated upon it with spirit until the picture was finished."

"Even upon persons to whom nature was less

parsimonious of her favours," he adds, "he knew that dulness would sometimes intrude, and, therefore, always wished that some friends should accompany his sitters, both for the purpose already mentioned, and also to relieve himself of the double task of painting and of keeping up a forced conversation at the same time."

Lastly, for his classicism, which is the really distinguishing characteristic of Romney's portraits and includes in it all the others. "On his arrival in Italy," Flaxman tells us, "he was witness to new scenes of art, and sources of study . . . he there contemplated the purity and perfection of ancient sculpture, the sublimity of Michel Angelo's Sistine chapel, and the simplicity of Cimabue's and Giotto's schools. He perceived these qualities [namely, be it observed, sublimity and simplicity] distinctly, and judiciously used them in viewing and imitating nature; and thus his quick perception and unwearied application enabled him by a two years' residence abroad to acquire as great a proficiency in art as is usually attained by foreign studies of much longer

duration." And again, " His cartoons . . . were examples of the sublime and terrible at that time perfectly new in English art. The Dream of Atossa, from the Persians of Æschylus, contrasted the death-like sleep of the Queen with the Bacchanalian Fury of the Genius of Greece. The composition was conducted with the fire and severity of a Greek bas-relief."

How many of the thousands of visitors to the National Gallery would ever imagine that this last paragraph was written of the painter of *The Parson's Daughter*, or *Mrs. Mark Currie*? And yet here, I cannot help feeling, is the real strength which underlies the structure of even the airiest of Romney's paintings. The roots of genius must grow deep if its branches are to grow high. The foundations of a great building must be firm. The faintest breeze of enlightened judgment is enough to blow away the ornamental bungalows of the Victorian portrait-painters, while castle Romney stands as firm as the rock on which it was built.

"In trying to attain excellence in his art," Flaxman continues, "his diligence was unceasing as his

gratification in the employment. He endeavoured to combine all the possible advantages of the subject immediately before him, and to exclude whatever had a tendency to weaken it. His compositions, like those of the ancient pictures and basso-relievos, told their story by a single group of figures in the front, whilst the background is made the simplest possible, rejecting all unnecessary episode and trivial ornament, either of secondary groups or architectural subdivision. In his compositions the beholder was forcibly struck by the sentiment at the first glance, the gradations and varieties of which he traced through several characters all conceived in an elevated spirit of dignity and beauty, with a lively expression of nature in all the parts."

Although written of his classical compositions, this criticism of Flaxman, who was himself more severely classical in his art than the Greeks, applies with almost equal truth to his portraits. It throws into light the hidden force that gives them their strength, that keeps them before us as live men and women instead of painted puppets and dolls.

"His heads were various," says Flaxman, still on the classical compositions, but holding the light even more closely to the portraits, "the male were decided and grand, the female lovely. His figures resembled the antique; the limbs were elegant, and finely formed. His drapery was well understood, either forming the figure into a mass with one or two deep folds only, or by its adhesion and transparency discovering the form of the figure, the lines of which were finely varied with the union or expansion of spiral or cascade folds, composing with or contrasting the outline and chiaroscuro. He was so passionately fond of Greek sculpture that he had filled his study and galleries with fine casts from the most perfect statues, groups, basso-relievos and busts of antiquity. He would sit and consider these in profound silence by the hour; and besides the studies in drawing and painting he made from them, he would examine them under all the changes of sunlight and daylight; and with lamps prepared on purpose at night he would try their effects lighted from above, beneath, in all directions, with rapturous admiration."

Before considering the particulars in which these observations may be said to be applicable to Romney's portraits, it is perhaps worth pointing out that the essential difference between the work of Reynolds and Romney is to be traced back to the influence exerted on each of them by his studies in Italy. Reynolds, perhaps fortunately for British art at the time, seems to have taken Michel Angelo and Raphael as the founders of painting, and to have confined his study of art, accordingly, to them and their successors. Romney, on the other hand, while also regarding them as the chiefs, went back from them to the antique, taking Cimabue and Giotto on the way. That he particularly admired Correggio is stated by Hayley, but that Correggio's "tenderness and grace he often emulated very happily in his figures of women and children" is a piece of criticism which I must confess to be beyond me. Certainly it cannot be applied to his portraits.

"His drapery was well understood," says Flaxman ; I need not quote the rest of the sentence, because it applies in particular to the drapery of ladies in the classic

His Simplicity of Treatment 35

period; but in principle, the drapery of Romney's sitters is as simple, because well understood, as that of Atossa. Of all painters of women surely there never was one who required such extreme simplicity of raiment. The plainest of white or black robes seem to have been the rule, and the most common exception to absolute simplicity was not in the garment at all, but in the addition of a somewhat elaborate and umbrageous hat. Of any pattern on the drapery, I can only recall one instance, namely, that of Miss Hannah Milnes, a three-quarter length portrait, now in the possession of Earl Crewe. Here there seems to be something of the manner of Sir Joshua in several particulars, which is possibly a conscious imitation. But in portrait after portrait, and certainly in every piece which is most characteristic of Romney, whether it is Mrs. Jordan or Lady Hamilton or Mrs. Currie, the plain robe is the rule. The magnificent picture of Louisa Countess of Mansfield (in profile, seated under a tree) is now on loan from Lord Cathcart at the National Gallery, and is hanging close beside Mrs. Mark Currie's; and while

36 George Romney

both depart from the letter of this rule, they depend for their magical effect upon the spirit of it. Lady Mansfield's flowing robe is of a pale yellowish tinge, and a voluminous scarf of grey, almost as pale, mingles with the folds of drapery. But as contrasted with the deep shadows of the foliage against which the brightly coloured profile is set, the general impression is of an exquisitely posed figure in the simplest of flowing creamy white robes. No ornament fixes the eye, no violent contrast of colour interrupts the rhythm of the whole figure. "The design," says Mr. Roberts in his *Catalogue Raisonné*, "appears to have been adopted from a Greek gem."

Mrs. Currie's dress, which I hope I am correct in describing as a frock, is of pure white ; but it is faintly striped, not I think in colour, but in texture ; and there are some bows on the elbows, and a sash of pale lake.

Anything less reminiscent of a Greek statue than this radiant young English beauty in a muslin frock, I am quite willing to admit, it would be difficult to think of. At first sight a severely classical taste would be more likely to condemn her for the

unmitigated prettiness that is usually associated with the cheapest kind of pictorial imbecility. But let her not be condemned unheard. That she was an exceedingly pretty woman need hardly be doubted, and that she wished to be made as pretty as possible in her portrait may fairly be taken for granted. If she had any other qualities it is probable that her name would be remembered for them. As it is, Romney has conscientiously painted a portrait of her which probably pleased her almost as much as it pleases all of us to-day. "In his composition," we remember, "the beholder was forcibly struck by the sentiment at the first glance." How true this is of Mrs. Currie and her prettiness! The painter's whole effort is concentrated on that one quality, and instead of dissipating the beholder's attention with accessories, he soothes it with a seeming artlessness which no one but a great painter could nearly accomplish. Mrs. Currie's drapery is of course strictly English—in substance at any rate and form. But here again we feel the guiding or restraining hand of the Classic Muse, just as we should have seen it had Romney

been painting Mrs. Currie in the character of Antigone. As it was, Romney was speaking English and not Greek ; only it is the English, as it were, of a finely educated man.

But in placing Romney so high above the crowd of ordinary portrait painters, and a little higher than any except Reynolds and Gainsborough, it is only fair to consider how far short he fell of equalling those two. And it must not be forgotten that the limitations which he imposed upon himself were quite as likely to affect his popularity among his patrons and their friends as with posterity. Classic simplicity is an invaluable quality in the portraiture of everyday men and women, especially when the latter are young and pretty ; but a gallery of portraits by Romney would afford a much narrower view of the capabilities of the English School than a similar exhibition of the work of Reynolds or Gainsborough. The oft-repeated assertion of Lord Chancellor Thurlow that "Reynolds and Romney divide the town, and I am of the Romney faction," must be taken with

a considerably larger pinch of salt than is popularly accepted with it. In the first place, Romney was not at all in fashion until after his return from Rome in 1785, by which time Reynolds had been painting portraits for at least twenty years. Gainsborough, too, who was by seven years the senior of Romney, was quite as many years ahead of him in practice, though he had only recently come to London from Bath. In the year 1785 we know that Romney earned £3635 from portraits. At this time, so his pupil Robinson records, his prices were £20 for a head, £30 for a kit-cat, £40 for a half-length, and £80 for a whole length. Taking the average at as low a figure as £35, this means about a hundred commissions in his busiest year. This is certainly a large number, and Sir Joshua never had more than a hundred-and-fifty in a year; but it must not be taken as an average for any great length of years.

Again, when we look at the names of his most distinguished patrons, the list is not as long or as imposing as those of Reynolds and Gainsborough. The latter had the patronage of Royalty, besides a

good number of the aristocracy, while Reynolds had, if I may be allowed the expression, "mopped up" all that was most brilliant in beauty, birth, and genius, leaving very little for anybody else. The Catalogue of the Exhibition of National Portraits held at South Kensington in 1867, enumerates but twenty pictures by Romney, and as many as a hundred and fifty by Reynolds.

That Romney's sensitive disposition and retiring habit of life may in some degree account for his not being more widely popular in his own time is no doubt true. But apart from any other consideration there is no question that a fine portrait by Reynolds is a more satisfying possession than any but the very finest by Romney, and a characteristic one by Gainsborough more exhilarating. Though there is at least one instance in which he "wiped Reynolds's eye," namely, with his magnificent head of *John Wesley*, which was painted in 1789, when Wesley was eighty-six years old. "At the earnest desire of Mrs T.," the old man wrote, "I once more sat for my picture. Mr. Romney is a painter

indeed! He struck off an exact likeness at once, and did more in an hour than Sir Joshua did in ten."

Still, there is a variety of qualities in Reynolds's and Gainsborough's pictures that we do not find, or expect to find, in those of Romney—a fact which must be taken into account in comparing the number of their respective portraits exhibited in 1867. The stream of popular taste steadily ebbed during the century following Sir Joshua's death, and it is only of late years that Romney has been "discovered" and restored to public favour. A great deal of Romney's present-day popularity I cannot help thinking is attributable as much to the delectable quality of his ladies' faces as to the classic simplicity of treatment which makes them what they are.

Then, of course, there is Lady Hamilton, to whom, as we find Allan Cunningham asserting, many have imputed the chief charm of Romney's best pictures. In these days it is certainly true that her name is inseparably associated with Romney's art in the popular mind, and the latest addition to the bibliography of Romney is concerned with nothing but Lady Hamilton. Unfortunately for Romney's

reputation both inside and outside his painting-room, this lady's fame has so filled the public ear with matters which are altogether distinct from the art of painting, that it is almost impossible to appreciate her influence upon Romney's art in anything like its proper proportions. We are as it were between two fires—the glamour which she threw over the painter and the glamour which he threw over her ; and our view of the matter, unless we are careful to screen our eyes, is likely to be too highly coloured for the ordinary purposes of criticism.

The broad fact seems to be that for nearly a decade the inspiration of Emma Lyon poured like sunlight into Romney's studio, and although before it came he had for several years established his reputation and done some of his best work in portraiture, its withdrawal, in 1791, was the end of all that was happy or successful in his career. "His imagination was gone," says Mr. Humphry Ward ; "his health, for many years frail, became less robust than ever, and of his portraits and pictures painted after 1791, many exhibit signs of decaying powers."

That he was exceedingly fond of her need not, of course, be doubted. How could it be otherwise? But is it any more necessary to dwell upon his purely personal relations with her than on those of Sir Joshua Reynolds with Kitty Fisher or Nelly O'Brien? For Reynolds, those two "professional beauties" were sitters, of whom the painter succeeded in painting several beautiful and accomplished portraits. For Romney, Emma Lyon was to some extent the embodiment of the Muse whom I have ventured to postulate as his guardian angel, when engaged in the perilous commerce of painting pretty and fashionable ladies. That she was also the veritable embodiment of all that was pleasing to the mortal eye in the shape of woman is at least equally certain; but unlike so many of her frail sisters, she was a remarkably accomplished and intelligent woman. "She performed both in the serious and comic to admiration," writes Romney, in a letter describing an evening at Sir William Hamilton's, "both in singing and acting. Her Nina surpasses everything I ever saw, and I believe as a piece of acting nothing ever surpassed it.

The whole company were in an agony of sorrow. Her acting is simple, grand, terrible, and pathetic."

In another letter, to Hayley in June 1791, he writes, "At present, and the greatest part of the summer, I shall be engaged in painting pictures from the divine lady. I cannot give her any other epithet, for I think her superior to all womankind. I have two pictures to paint of her for the Prince of Wales. She says she must see you. . . . She asked me if you would not write my life. I told her you had begun it. Then she said she hoped you would have much to say of her in the life, as she prided herself in being my model." And again in the following month "I dedicate my time to this charming lady; there is a prospect of her leaving town with Sir William for two or three weeks. They are very much hurried at present, as everything is going on for their speedy marriage, and all the world following and talking of her, so that if she had not more good sense than vanity her brain must be turned.

"The pictures I have begun are Joan of Arc, a Magdalen, and a Bacchante, for the Prince of Wales,

EMMA, LADY HAMILTON

National Portrait Gallery





LADY HAMILTON AS A BACCHANTE

(1786) National Gallery



and another I am to begin as a companion to the Bacchante. I am also to paint a picture of Constance for the Shakespeare Gallery."

The extent of Romney's obligations to her, simply as a model, may be gathered from a glance at Mr. Roberts's Catalogue Raisonné of his work. Here we find forty-five different pictures of the fair Emma, a figure which is about doubled if we count the various versions painted of one and another—as a Bacchante, for example, no less than twelve separate canvases are enumerated. Nor does this catalogue probably include a good many sketches and studies which were left unfinished. Of the various characters in which he painted her, apart from pictures which were simply portraits, the list includes those of Alope, Ariadne, a Bacchante, Cassandra, Circe, Comedy, the Comic Muse, Contemplation, Euphrosyne, a Gipsy, Iphigenia, Joan of Arc, a Magdalen, Meditation, Miranda, Nature, a Nun, a Pythian Priestess, S. Cecilia, Sensibility, a Shepherdess, Sigismunda, the Spinstress. The Sempstress, it may be mentioned, was not painted from her, but from Miss Vernon.

MRS. MARK CURRIE

(1789) National Gallery



Universal Magazine. Hayley says that he consumed the time of his fellow-workmen in sketching them in various attitudes, while John Romney states that Lionardo's treatise on painting, illustrated by many fine engravings, was early in his hands. Cumberland describes him as "a child of nature who had never seen or heard of anything that could elicit his genius or urge him to emulation, and who became a painter without a prototype." At nineteen, however, he was apprenticed for four years to a painter called Count Steele, who was practising in the neighbouring town of Kendal. During this time he fell in love with a young lady of some little fortune, Mary Abbot, and on October 14, 1756, he carried her across the border to Gretna Green and married her.

His precipitate marriage drew upon him the rebuke of his parents, but he vindicated himself with some firmness and skill. "If you consider everything deliberately," he wrote, "you will find it to be the best affair that ever happened to me; because if I have fortune I shall make a better painter than I should otherwise have done, as it will

be a spur to my application; and my thoughts being now still, and not obstructed by youthful follies, I can practise with more diligence and success than ever."

According to Hayley, he soon perceived that his marriage was an obstacle to his studies; that he was ruined as an artist, and that he might bid farewell to all hopes of fame and glory, although he was devoting himself with all his might to his work. "The terror of precluding himself from those distant honours," says Hayley—to whom, by-the-by, we are under no obligation to believe more than we wish—"by appearing in the world as a young married man, agitated the ambitious artist almost to distraction, and made him resolve very soon after his marriage, as he had no means of breaking the fetters which he wildly regarded as inimical to the improvement and exertion of his genius, to hide them as much as possible from his troubled fancy."

This exordium of Hayley's is, as it were, in the nature of a "preliminary announcement" of the separation between Romney and his wife, when five years later he resolved to try his fortune in London.



MISS BENEDETTA RAMUS

Viscount Hambleden



"In working rapidly and patiently at different places in the north, for a few years," Hayley continues, "by painting heads as large as life at the price of two guineas or figures at whole length on a small scale for six guineas, he contrived to raise a sum amounting almost to a hundred pounds; taking thirty for his own travelling expenses, and leaving the residue to support an unoffending partner and two children, he set forth alone, without even a letter of recommendation, to try the chances of life in the metropolis."

That was in 1762; and for a much longer period than Shakespeare, and with no occasional visits to his family, Romney worked in London and became more and more famous, until, as we have seen, his decline set in.

"The summer of 1799 came," writes Allan Cunningham, "but Romney could neither enjoy the face of nature, nor feel pleasure in his studio and gallery. A visible mental languor sat upon his brow—not diminishing but increasing; he had laid aside his pencils; his swarm of titled sitters, whose smile in other days rendered passing time so agreeable,

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were moved off to a Lawrence, a Shee, or a Beechey ; and thus left lonely and disconsolate among whole cartloads of paintings, which he had not the power to complete, his gloom and his weakness gathered and grew upon him In these moments his heart and his eye turned towards the north—where his son, a man affectionate and kind, resided ; and where his wife, surviving the cold neglect and long estrangement of her husband, lived yet to prove the depth of a woman's love, and show to the world that she would have been more worthy of appearing at his side, even when earls sat for their pictures, and Lady Hamilton was enabling him to fascinate princes with his Calypsos and Cassandras. Romney departed from Hampstead, and taking the northern coach arrived among his friends at Kendal in the summer of 1799. The exertion of travelling and the presence of her whom he once had warmly loved overpowered him ; he grew more languid and more weak, and finding fireside happiness he resolved to remain where he was ; he purchased a house and authorised the sale of that on Hampstead Hill."

So much for the parallel as concerned the private life of either. But what about his art? Where in Shakespeare's literary career are we to find anything comparable with the influence of Emma Lyon on Romney's painting during the crowning decade of his accomplishment? I suggest as the answer, that during a similar period, of about the same duration, namely from about 1593 to 1603, we may trace a similar influence on the poet, which is embodied in a series of masterpieces numbering over a hundred, namely, most if not all, of the first hundred and twenty-five of "Shakespeare's Sonnets." They were all written to one person, and in such terms of art as have led others besides Alexander Dyce to suppose that they were really addressed to the poet's muse rather than to any corporeal being. As in the case of Romney, the author has been maligned by the undiscerning vulgar for supposed deviations from the strict path of virtue in his relations with his friend. But for any one who has an understanding of the spirit of art there is nothing in either case to support the allegation. Had Shakespeare and Romney looked no

farther than their own hearths for artistic inspiration, the world would have been the poorer : that is all.

Of Romney's classical or historical pictures the world knows almost as little as it cares about them. "I have made many grand designs," he himself wrote in 1794, "I have formed a system of original subjects, moral and my own, and I think one of the grandest that has been thought of—but nobody knows it." Cunningham, after disposing shortly of his portraits, proceeds to state that the historical and domestic pictures, finished and unfinished, deserve a more minute examination ; that they embrace a wide range of reading and observation and are numerous beyond all modern example. But with the exception of *Titania and her Indian Votaries* and *Milton Dictating to his Daughters*, which were mentioned by Flaxman, and various fancy portraits of Lady Hamilton, he does not specify a single finished example. His explanation is that "for one finely finished there are five half done, and for five half done there are at least a dozen merely commenced on the canvas."

PORTRAIT OF ROMNEY BY HIMSELF (UNFINISHED)

(1782) National Portrait Gallery



So far as these canvases are concerned, there is no doubt that the majority of them have been destroyed; but there are still in existence a large quantity of drawings and sketches on paper, both in pencil and in India ink, for classical compositions. As many of these are probably rough ideas for his lost pictures, it is perhaps worth mentioning a few of the subjects enumerated by Cunningham among the unfinished productions, which may help to identify the sketches, besides, as Cunningham says, "showing the range of his mind, and also his want of patience to render his works worthy of admission to public galleries." The principal are as follows: *King Lear Asleep, King Lear Awake, Ceyx and Alcyone, The Death of Niobe's Children, The Cumean Sibyl Foretelling the Destiny of Aeneas, Electra and Orestes at the Tomb of Agammemnon, Thetis Supplicating Jupiter, Thetis Comforting Achilles, Damon and Musidora, Homer Reciting his Verses, David and Saul, Macbeth and Banquo, The Descent of Odin, The Ghost of Clytemnestra, Eurydice vanishing from Orpheus, Harpalice, A Thracian Princess defending*

her wounded Father, Antigone with the Corpse of Polynices, A Witch displaying her Magical Powers, Resuscitation by Force of Magic, Doll Tearsheet, Cupid and Psyche.

Besides these there are a number of portrait sketches, which though not so numerous, are much more charming, in spite of their being exceedingly rough and slight. They must have been simply notes, and can seldom have been intended for more than fixing an idea in the painter's mind. I have as many as a dozen in my own possession which I have picked up here and there in the dealers' portfolios, and there are probably a good number of them in existence. Rough as they are, they are certainly deserving of more attention than is usually accorded to them; for though Romney never seems to have enjoyed the process of committing a portrait to paper as Gainsborough did, these business-like notes of pose and chiaroscuro give us a good insight into his methods of setting to work. Perhaps the taste of a future generation will prefer the rough-hewn idea of a great portrait painter to the finished achievement of Benwell or Buck in little.

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